Political Consciousness Contribution to Public Participation on Socio-Economic Issues in South Africa

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Abstract: Socio-economic issues are affecting a high number of individuals and households across the globe, more especially in South Africa. The post-apartheid era in South Africa introduced democracy which led to the formulation of mechanisms of public participation that allowed people to voice out their views regarding socio-economic issues such as unemployment, illiteracy, corruption, poverty and inequality. The participation strategy has been active for quite a period after the apartheid era and they have collapsed recently due to people's loss of confidence in the ruling government because of inadequate consideration of the publics needs and ideas. Therefore, this has led to the opening of opportunities for multiple political parties to exist in South Africa to which they have come to positively contribute in the increase of people's political consciousness regarding socio-economic issues. This paper posits that politics in South Africa have been an eye opener for many people in terms of social and economic aspects, which has led to their eagerness to participate in social and economic issues. The state has a mandate to serve its citizens and be accountable for any decisions that will affect the public and the economy. The lack of transparency, accountability, responsiveness and corruption in South Africa has caused political instability and the public began to realise how politics affect them both at national, provincial and local level. Problems such as poverty, unemployment and illiteracy that have been existing for many years, will continue increasing in the presence of a government that is negligent, abuses power, incompetent, ineffective and unethical towards public prioritisation. When people become conscious about socio-economic issues, the government should provide them with a platform to participate in socio-economic development and their views should be taken into consideration.

Keywords: Consciousness, Corruption, Politics, Public participation, Socio-economic issues

1. Introduction

In the past, many people in South Africa were just living their lives without the political consciousness and the government was making social, economic and political decisions on their own even though some of them should have been shared with the ordinary citizens (Maphunye, 2001; Kesselman, Kreiger & Joseph, 2018). Majority of the people were not engaging and taking part in developmental debates about issues that were affecting their lives while few were taking part. People always willed to participate in socio-economic issues that were affecting their lives, but however, their voices were being ignored (Bardill, 2000). People's opinions were being ignored and their contributions that were not taken into consideration, made citizens to lose hope in the government, which generated anger and frustrations (Besdziek, 2006). That has led to the establishment of many political parties in South Africa to challenge the government in ensuring that people's needs are taken into consideration.

The argument of the study put an emphasis on the idea that participation in socio-economic issues is insufficient due to lack of public awareness. Therefore, the state of political consciousness provides opportunity to participate in matters concerning issues of the country (Serrano & Xhafa, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). This tends to awaken an individual's political role, to allow an opportunity to engage and contribute in the development strategies and decisions (Hussein, 2003; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). When people became politically aware they have the eager, the courage, the confidence to participate in development and socio-economic issues (Wolf, 2017). When people are politically aware they begin to realize their economic and social problems, with that they can push the government to be more responsible and accountable in terms of their development. The argument of the study emphasizes on the idea that participation in socio-economic issues is insufficient due to lack of awareness.

2. The State of Political Consciousness

Politics remain a major key informant to the public in terms of the issues that exist around the community,

country and the world in general (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Kesselman *et al*., 2018). They have also played a critical role to make people aware about their constitutional rights in the country. People are informed through mechanisms of politics that aims at addressing socio-economic issues (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Serrano & Xhafa, 2012). This can be a very reliable source of information to those who choose to be ignorant to the conditions of a country. Today people's opinions count more as compared to the past (Fuo, 2015). Political consciousness is not about the ruling party having more power to do whatever they want without people's concern but is about the government being committed to bring justice and human dignity to all people (Maphunye, 2001; Ismail, Theron & Maphunye, 2009; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018).

Socio-economic issues can be considered as the main topics around political debates and it is significantly important that multiple sectors and spheres engage in these debates and discussions (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Serrano & Xhafa, 2012). Therefore, this will improve the effectiveness of the decision-making process (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). This will allow for contribution of information and resources from multiple and relevant sources. The lack of political consciousness from some individuals and organisations limits the ability to effectively address issues that involve them (Rahman, 1993; Kesselman *et al*., 2018). The post-apartheid government of South Africa has opened opportunities for public participation in socio-economic development, where those who are politically conscious are able to engage on their thoughts, ideas and knowledge (Maphunye, 2001; Mhome & Edighenji, 2003).

South Africa has introduced a democratic system that allows the public to voice out their concerns and needs (Maphunye, 2001). Those at the top have the power and resources to utilize towards addressing the socio-economic issues. The moment the country suffers from such conditions it is the duty of the government to come up with the solutions with the help of the public (Rahman, 1993; Ismail, Theron & Maphunye, 2009). Despite, the policies and legislations that have been put forward to ensure accountability and responsibility in the system (Mhome & Edighenji, 2003), the country still struggles to effectively execute the strategies that have been initiated to assist in development (Dinello & Popov, 2007). The mere reason can be because of multiple factors such as high levels of

corruption within the system and lack of accountability. Corruption has been a major disease hindering effective development. The case of corruption only benefits those at the top with resources at their disposal (Bhorat, Buthelezi, Chipkin, Duma, Mondi, Peter & Swilling, 2017).

Those at the grassroots on the other hand are disadvantaged by such actions. This is resulting in a national crisis of socio-economic problems and creating a slow pace in development. The possible reasons for such unfortunate acts by the government may be a result of having a state run by some individuals who are considered to be illiterate, incompetent, negligent and selfish (Vally & Motala, 2014). The notion of 'knowledge is power' comes to effect, but the lack of opportunity to exercise the knowledge (power) becomes ineffective and useless (Murphy, Mufti & Kassen, 2011; Vally & Motala, 2014). This situation gives light to Plato's famous quote that "those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber". The country has shifted towards a knowledge-based economy since the beginning of the twentieth century and the public and the youth in the early post-apartheid era have been well informed in international affairs, but less-informed in the national affairs (Diao & McMillan, 2017). Despite, all the exposure and opportunities presented to them to participate in the national affairs. The political ignorance in the early democratic South Africa has resulted in slow growth in improving the socio-economic conditions (Udjo, Simelane & Booysen, 2000).

Political consciousness has led to major discussions on socio-economic issues in multiple platforms such as the media, academia and other sources (Dinello & Popov, 2007). The political system has opened opportunities for discussion on the matters, allowing participation from the general public who are the victims of such issues (Kesselman *et al*., 2018). This process increased the level of political awareness among the communities (Johnson, 2003; Ismail, Theron & Maphunye, 2009). People started to contribute and engage in the decision-making processes, using the resources that are at their disposal such as education where they are able to learn and acquire sufficient information (Hanushek, 2013; Vally & Motala, 2014). The public have the potential and capacity to solve their own problems and assist the state in coming up with effective strategies and solutions to national problems. This is achieved only

if the government works together with the public and understands the operations or systems of both parties (Serrano & Xhafa, 2012); because the root of all problems is lack of awareness, information and collaboration (Rahman, 1993).

Development is about bringing change to the lives of people and improving the human conditions through projects and quality services (Bardill, 2000; Ismail *et al*., 2009). Therefore, for people's lives to be improved it does not take the community members only but it is a collective action that need public, private and the people which are the beneficiaries. Political consciousness is about the government creating an inclusive environment where people with different races, religions, cultures are included in development to improve their standard of living (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Kesselman *et al*., 2018). The apartheid government focused on the development of urban areas were white people resides, but the black people were living under the cloud of poverty, few access to better services such as quality education, quality water, houses, electricity and many more (Amir, 2003). Even the ruling government recently should focus on balancing development between people and between rural and urban areas. Political consciousnesses is not there to cause violence but it is there to bring people together to have common goals in development and transform the country in a better place for everyone to live on. Political consciousness in South Africa is also about correcting the mistakes done by the apartheid government and the ruling government that suppress the people and deny them their access to services and rights (Amir, 2003; Serrano & Xhafa, 2012). The government needs to ensure that people are treated with fairness, respect, dignity, and ensuring that people are also freed economically and socially. The building blocks of public participation such as participation, social learning and empowerment of which are crucial stimulating political consciousness.

3. Public Participation

The role of public participation has been a major influence in development strategies of many countries for quite a period. However, public participation in South Africa became dominant and a key strategy for addressing socio-economic issues during the post-apartheid era (Davids, 2005; Fuo, 2015). The first general mass participation in South Africa was seen in April 1994 during the general elections of the new ruling government (Davids, 2005). The newly elected democratic government strived to address the imbalances, injustices and problems of the past, by introducing a platform of public participation.

According to Simon (2006), participation is a process whereby people are engaging with one-another in decision making, anticipating and being active in the planning, implementation and operation of the services that affect their lives. People can only participate if they are aware of the opportunities that are presented to them (Fuo, 2015). The opportunity can come in a form of an idea, a need or even a problem (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). According to Vally & Motala (2014) one of the major contributors of South Africa's socio-economic problems has to do with lack of participation in decision making processes.

Development is about brining change and improvement of every community by ensuring that people's lives are improved on daily basis. It is difficult for the government to develop people or an area without involving the beneficiaries of that development which are the people (Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). Political consciousness played a huge role that has led to the introduction of the building blocks of participation, types and mechanisms of participation (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). When people became aware and saw that they have a role to play in building the country through their contributions by providing their own views, development preferences and inputs regarding decision making (Simon, 2006). The contributions made by the community members should be taken into considerations in that way it will also make people to gain more confidence in their leaders (Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). Public participation is when people exercise their power, acting and controlling their resources in a collective manner (Rahman, 1993). During the apartheid era, not all people were given the chance to exercise their power through participation by the government (Amir, 2003).

The government through participation should enhance the strategy and the policy that focus on improving the welfare of all people especially the poor by establishing more patterns that address inequality (Mhone & Edigheji, 2003). Transparency is important, because, the leading and elected political representatives they represent the public in parliament and they should keep on updating the South

African people who voted for them (Ismail *et al*., 2009). The lack of transparency and accountability by the government is one of the major reasons of the breakout of new political parties in South Africa (Ismail *et al.,* 2009). Many government officials usually go to rural areas and urban areas making community meetings and gatherings to hear the needs of the people. While other scholars have argued that most of the government officials only visit community members during the time of voting to secure votes from people (Johnson, 2003; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018).

But the government needs to keep on visiting community members daily and hear their needs, which is consulting participation. The people in South Africa, lost hope in the ruling party because of their approach of being active politically during the elected time (Long, 2001). The political debates taking place on various social media and television that has also impacted and increased the desire for people to join political structures in as their constitutional rights and participate in the affairs of South Africa (Mhome & Edighenji, 2003). Participation is a process that takes time and place through openness that involve and allow community members, individuals to share views, exchange and making influential and major decisions together (Theron & Ceasar, 2008; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018). The debates in parliament by various political parties that has been influential to many African people, more especially the youth, has been a positive impact and reduced the ignorance of many African people (Pieterse, 2002).

4. Types of Public Participation

There are many types of public participation. For purposes of this paper focus on the three types which are passive, information giving and consultative participation.

4.1 Passive Participation

Passive participation is mostly used in the form of top-down approach inconsiderate of peoples' opinion. In development, the top-down approach not many people or beneficiaries are given the chance to voice out their views. In passive participation, the people are informed about what is going to happen or what has happened without their inputs (Ismail *et al*., 2009). During the apartheid era most blacks, Indians and coloreds were included regarding

socio-economic issues that were affecting them, but they were only informed about developmental issues. When people are not involved in solving socio-economic issues they end up lacking proper information that they can use to articulate the social and economic issues that hold their lives back (Mhone & Edigheji, 2003; Fuo, 2015). That has fueled the many black people and challenged the ruling government because they were denied the right to participate in development projects within their country. After the apartheid, recently the people started being ignorant. Development is all about empowering the people, yet the passive participation makes people powerless even while they have resources in their communities. The passive participation was encouraged by the political elites as a silent strategy to exclude people from participating in socio-economic issues (Fuo, 2015). The political consciousness also played a role to collapse the passive participation since it was promoted to avoid people influencing and challenging government decisions that were not favoring them.

4.2 Participation by Information Giving

This kind of participation model does not differ much from passive participation because people participate by being given information and answering questionnaires (survey forms), (Johnson, 2003). People still have less power to take control over their resources because of the change agents which the government is keep on, providing the people with services that they do not need at that time (Fuo, 2015). Prioritization is very important towards the development of different communities; the government needs to prioritize the needs of the people and deal with issues of emergency. People being participants by giving information it is not enough but also this kind of participation was not effective in terms of most black people. People in South Africa were not conscious about the socio-economic issues of which were affecting them in a negative way because they did not have access to proper information. Studies show that majority of the people in South Africa were ignorant, recently the people of South Africa politics opened their eyes regarding the socio-economic issues that need their attention (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). The government cannot use the information in addressing unemployment because that will require more people to be involved in direct manner to have the chance to voice out their concerns. The concerns also regarding the participation by information giving is that the information given

to people might not be accurate but misleading, while some information may be hidden to ordinary citizens.

4.3 Consultative Participation

Public participation was not received well by numerous governments in the less developed countries because it was a threat to their governance and existence (Ismail *et al*., 2009). Public participation through consultation it shows commitment of the government to involve people in any developmental projects of which it was very rare in the past in South Africa. The political consciousness it states that consultation should take place without marginalizing people regarding their races, religions, cultures and culture. It is what delayed the development of South Africa, because when the government focus on specific race or urban areas more than developing rural areas they are not fair because there should be a balance between development in rural and urban areas and equal consultation between all races. Consultation is very crucial in the development of people, then the ordinary citizens they feel like they have ownership and control over their country (Oldfield, 2008). Participation in South Africa included the marginalized people who stay towards the periphery of towns and cities to participate in the implementation of projects in their areas.

The government of South Africa realised that the people who are affected by extreme poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are mostly those in rural areas (Diao & McMillan, 2017). Therefore, through participation by such people and the support of the government the people can really see that there are efforts being made to relief from poverty. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy are macro socio-economic issues that affect all people majority youth, while others are graduates while others are not graduates that they also crucial and of value towards the development of this country (Cloet & Wissink, 2000). In South Africa, many young people were not interested in the politics while studies show that most were ignorant but since poverty and unemployment were escalating it became a wake call to many people (De Swardt & Theron, 2004). Then people saw that it is their responsibility also to assist the government through their inputs and intake regarding many socio-economic issues. Even though people are consulted through municipal meetings it is more often that other people in other communities do not attend such gatherings.

5. The Building Blocks of Participation

Participation is a process that emphasizes on social learning, empowerment and sustainability which promote the bottom-up approach in the planning and implementation process of development strategies (Maphunye, 2001). This participative process creates a learning environment that provides the people with the capacity to engage in socio-economic issues affecting them.

5.1 Social Learning

The high rate of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy has been a problem in South Africa and it persist, but social learning can play a role in ensuring that skills are transferred to people when a certain project takes place (Roemer, 2014). Participation is not only about the citizens voicing their views but the importance of social learning, those who are unemployed can be hired in a project to work and that is participation and empowerment. The elected representatives in parliament should raise this issue and let the people know that when a project takes place, the people who reside in that community are the ones who know their place and the needs that they need as a community. South Africa is a very competitive country with large skilled labor force of which it has led to unemployment of many people due to lack of skills, education, and experience. The change agents should provide people with skills and employ community members as a way of empowering them and having access to income and fight unemployment, malnutrition, and food insecurities (Monaheng, 2008).

5.2 Empowerment

Political consciousness gave people the sense to participate in their country's affairs and empowerment is one of the building blocks that people would like to have. The issues of unemployment amongst graduate youth people, the government of South Africa assisted by providing government employment opportunities (De Swardt & Theron, 2004). That is empowerment by providing young people the skills and experience so that they can be independent and be able to compete in the labor market. Political consciousness made people to fight for their rights to be empowered not only to be beneficiaries of development but as actors in their own development.

5.3 Sustainability

Sustainability is meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Poor governance leads the programs of addressing poverty to be mean less, make employment strategies to fail because of corruption and lack of promoting public participation by the beneficiaries (Ismail, 2001). To secure effective participation, the public must be involved as the experts and they should also have access to the decentralized institutions that will honor their priorities (Smith, 2002).

5.4 Socio-Economic Issues

South Africa's economy has been experiencing a slow growth over the past few years, mainly because of rising socio-economic issues which have affected the structural change in the domestic economy (The World Bank, 2014). Nonetheless, the current economic performance of South Africa can be celebrated as it has shifted significantly towards a positive direction (Rodrick, 2016). The standard of living has improved over the past few years, and is continuing to improve (Diao & McMillan, 2017). The new systems put in place by the government, together with the public, has resulted in growth (Mhome & Edighenji, 2003). Politics have been an eye opener in the current changes and practices. Socio-economic issues such as unemployment as well as income inequality is a major issue affecting a high number of individuals and communities across the globe, more especially in South Africa (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006; Hanushek, 2013; Diao & McMillan, 2017). The lack of adequate knowledge to overcome socio-economic problems has a great impact on the development of the country (Vally & Motala, 2014). Some individuals in South Africa are economically inactive due to the lack of awareness and opportunities within the communities (Loewer, 2012). Therefore, there is a need for people to acquire the necessary information and knowledge to address the country's socio-economic development.

Socio-economic development emphasizes on the change in the social and economic aspects of society (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006; Roemer, 2014; Diao & McMillan, 2017). Socio-economic development indicators have been identified by international

organisations in assisting the measurement of development progress and performance across the globe (Udjo, Simelane & Booysen, 2000). Hence developing countries managed to take into considerate of the proposed international indicators of socio-economic development by developing initiatives that come up with specific indicators for addressing their country's needs (Udjo *et al*., 2000; OECD, 2010). The indicators of socio-economic development measure the progress of households looking at the social and economic factors such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), poverty and inequality, educational background, employment, economic growth, health, childhood mortality, safety and security, social cohesion, household and community assets (Udjo *et al.,* 2000; Roemer, 2014). Despite the improvement of the economy there exist issues that come with the evolution of the economies including 'corruption, infrastructure bottleneck, skills mismatches, social exclusion, regulations that stifle competition and entrepreneurship and keep that one third of the labour force unemployed or too discouraged to seek work' (World Bank, 2014; Diao & McMillan, 2017).

Corruption is one of the most severe issues when coming to the governance of South Africa. The level of corruption affects distribution and development in the country, as the system is manipulated in the favour of only those who are in power. According to the National Planning Commission, it has been discussed and realised that corruption involves both the public and the private sectors (internal and external) (National Planning Commission, 2012). This in turn enforces the dynamics of exclusion by the government. The governance of South Africa currently has been undergoing investigation of state capture. This examines the controversial conundrum emanating within the state governments because of political and economic influence from external sources. The constitutional systems and laws of government are manipulated to benefit the individual and personal interests of both the involved public officials and these external private sources (Bhorat *et al*., 2017; Wolf, 2017). Many states fall victim of a plethora of political corruption that exercises unethical decision making in the processes of the state (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Bhorat *et al*., 2017). This creates a problematic situation in the system and structure of the state. The state as the leadership of the public should aim at serving the community and their citizens interest on an ethical basis without the abuse of power,

privileged information and resources vested upon them (Mhome & Edighenji, 2003; Wolf, 2017).

The most recent public issue involves the former president Jacob Zuma and his external associates the 'Guptas', who have been collaborating in abusing the states resources (Wolf, 2017). The 'Guptas', are a wealthy Indian-born South African family and own a private business empire with enough money to manipulate the systems of government because of their ties with the former president (Bhorat *et al*., 2017; Wolf, 2017). Has alienated the public from the government, causing a political awakening in the public to address and solve the matter. The issue is that the decision making has been influenced by the family which saw the public realising the power and control of the family in the public funds and resources (Wolf, 2017). Ever since the controversy of state capture being been put forward and highlighted, politicians and the public have been in a frenzy regarding the issue, debating and fighting for redemption within the state institutions (Dinello & Popov, 2007; Bhorat *et al*., 2017).

Developing countries including South Africa need to be aware of the risks emanating from social imbalances which can have a significant impact on the economic growth, which can contribute to the inability to address poverty, income inequality and mortality rates, and to improve life expectancy (Roemer, 2014). Communities in South Africa are characterized by different socio-economic status that define their quality of life (Hanushek, 2013; Roemer, 2014). Empowerment and participation needs to be encouraged to strengthen the capacity of individuals and communities to enable themselves to improve their quality of life (Krugman, Wells & Graddy, 2014). The participation of the public in local issues requires individuals and communities to have a clear understanding of the civil rights, political systems and roles of the different spheres of government from local to national (Hussein, 2003, Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006).

Skills, training and human resource development are key aspects of economic life (Roemer, 2014). The education sector and employment sector are two different fields, but they have certain aspects that link them together. According to Murphy *et al.* (2011), the aim of education is considered to be a process to maintain and develop the economic well-being of the individual and society generally. The creation of employment opportunities which allows an individual to earn a salary that can help them maintain a decent standard of living, depend upon the participation of an individual in the social and economic systems (Boehm, 2010; Hanushek, 2013; Krugman *et al*., 2014).

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